

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

January 19, 2022

9:00 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Roger Holland, Chair
Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair
Senator Shelley Hughes
Senator Peter Micciche
Senator Tom Begich

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT

Representative Mike Prax

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

DEED UPDATE: PROGRESS ON OUR SHARED PRIORITIES

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

MICHAEL JOHNSON, Ph.D., Commissioner
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a DEED update titled Progress on Our Shared Priorities.

ACTION NARRATIVE

9:00:49 AM

CHAIR ROGER HOLLAND called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Stevens, Hughes, Begich, Micciche, and Chair

Holland. He acknowledged Representative Prax attended the presentation.

Short at ease

CHAIR HOLLAND reconvened the meeting and re-announced the members present.

DEED Update: Progress on Our Shared Priorities

[9:01:55 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND announced a DEED update titled Progress on Our Shared Priorities.

[9:02:14 AM](#)

MICHAEL JOHNSON, Ph.D., Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), Juneau, Alaska, expressed appreciation for all educators, students, parents, partners, and DEED employees in Alaska for their great accomplishments.

[9:04:55 AM](#)

DR. JOHNSON began the presentation on slide 2 and stated that public education sharing the same mission, vision, and purpose leads to improvement. It is essential to have the same priorities. Turning to slide 3, he stated that the five priorities from Alaska's Education Challenge, adopted by the Alaska Board of Education four years ago, remain the best pathway out of the pandemic. The Alaska Board of Education has established five board subcommittees around these priorities to identify what needs to be done to move the priorities forward. The Department of Education will continue to encourage and support associations whose joint position statements promote the priorities of the Alaska Education Challenge. The committee's work with DEED on a comprehensive reading bill is an accomplishment stemming from this challenge.

[9:06:52 AM](#)

DR. JOHNSON indicated that the remainder of the presentation highlights work that resulted from focusing on priorities. Reading is the first priority. The state board supports a comprehensive reading bill that includes high-quality PreK, accountability, and additional resources for the schools performing the lowest in reading. He quoted Emily Hanford, an investigative reporter:

When kids struggle to learn how to read, it can lead to a downward spiral in which behavior, vocabulary,

knowledge, and other cognitive skills are eventually affected by slow reading development. A disproportionate number of poor readers become high school dropouts and end up in the criminal justice system.

The Department of Education surveyed districts' K-3 reading instructional practices in response to legislative intent language. Results showed significant inconsistencies across the state. A solid statewide reading policy can correct the inconsistency. Examples of work being done to improve reading outcomes are:

- An Alaska Reading Playbook based on the science of reading instruction. Region 16 Comprehensive Center is partnering with DEED and professional development will be offered through a series of webinars.
- Updating of the Alaska Literacy Blueprint.
- A Dyslexia training eLearning module to assist with unifying reading instruction practices.
- Two long term non-permanent positions to assist in unfinished learning and reading improvement. Currently the positions are funded through Covid. If a comprehensive reading bill is passed the positions would become permanent.
- Supporting Effective Literacy Instruction professional development program provided in partnership with Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), the Consortium of Reaching Excellence in Education (CORE) and the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED). It is a 10-week course, beginning in March for 100 participants.
- Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) classes will be offered in partnership with Region 16 Comprehensive Center and DEED. It is a one-year course with an assessment for 60 teachers and 30 administrators.
- Science or Reading Symposium will occur April 1 - May 1. DEED will pay for staff from targeted and comprehensive support and improvement schools to attend. It is an opportunity for stakeholders to hear from experts and discuss the science and importance of reading. The committee is encouraged to attend.

9:11:51 AM

SENATOR HUGHES stated the pandemic has taken a two-year toll on students and catching up may be difficult. She asked if DEED or the board have recommendations before the education committee bill is discussed next week.

9:12:57 AM

DR. JOHNSON replied he would contemplate the educational concerns resulting from the pandemic and the possible need for changes to the education bill. Education has many vital needs, but a comprehensive reading bill that includes PreK is the pathway out of Alaska's challenges. Reading does not oppose other subjects but is used in teaching them. A comprehensive reading bill will help overcome learning challenges that resulted from the pandemic. DEED and the Alaska Council of Administrators are using Covid money for summer and after-school programs to provide additional opportunities for student learning.

9:14:22 AM

SENATOR HUGHES wondered whether special interventions need to be added temporarily to the reading bill for upper elementary students who experienced lost opportunity in lower elementary school due to Covid.

9:15:01 AM

DR. JOHNSON responded that Susan McKenzie, will be coming to committee meetings to explain how trainings will address education concerns resulting from Covid. She is a reading specialist and the Director of the Division of Innovation and Education in Excellence.

DR. JOHNSON moved to slide 5 and stated that increased Career and Technical Education (CTE) and culturally relevant education are the second priority for the state. DEED has been working with the Alaska Association for Career and Technical Education (AK ACTE) in developing an online clearinghouse for all CTE programs and educators in Alaska. It is a new platform that provides a means for teachers to communicate, collaborate and share effective support of students and CTE programs. AK ACTE will work with CTE stakeholders at DEED's Spring Perkins Workshop February 9-11, 2022, and will beta test with select stakeholders in Spring 2022. He encouraged the committee to hear more about the project from DEED's CTE Manager Brad Billings and colleagues from ACTE.

Cook Inlet Tribal Council is working on a digital badge project that recognizes and provides proof of student accomplishments. The badges can be used when applying for jobs. Digital badging offers greater academic challenges and career skill development opportunities than the standard curriculum. Involvement with Cook Inlet Tribal Council provides for the integration of

indigenous content and methods to improve educational outcomes for all students.

9:18:25 AM

DR. JOHNSON mentioned the Kusilvak Career Academy (KCA) is a joint project between the Anchorage School District and the Lower Yukon School District. KCA is the principal conduit for Lower Yukon School District students' access to CTE and other resources for obtaining certifications and licensures. The academy enables Lower Yukon School District students to access quality driver's education programs which have enabled students to obtain driver's licenses needed for employment. This program may eventually help with school bus driver shortages in the area. DEED awarded this program \$81,670 using Covid funds.

9:20:28 AM

DR. JOHNSON said the Pathways Program in Tok is an alternative program within Alaska Gateway School District (AGSD). It is a community and school district partnership for high school students that are significantly behind in credits, face risk factors, and are in danger of dropping out. The Pathways Program provides a complete academic curriculum combined with career and technical training. Its goal is to meet students where they are and help them find a path to graduation and a successful future. The program is in the donated Keith William Irons Youth Center building. DEED awarded the program a grant of \$150,000 using Covid funds for staffing startup costs.

The last CTE project mentioned was the Northwest Alaska Career and Technical Center (NACTEC) Truck Driving Simulator. A schoolbook storage room was converted into a multipurpose CTE training simulator center to assist students in obtaining commercial driver's licenses. DEED awarded \$200 thousand using Covid funds.

9:23:04 AM

SENATOR MICCICHE asked if DEED has assembled a team to access national products that take advantage of rapidly improving broadband as opposed to using in-house development and training. National products are usually more cost effective, and the associated savings would help deliver the onsite face to face improvements found in the committee bill. He used civics training as an example of not wanting unfunded mandates for school districts.

9:25:04 AM

DR. JOHNSON replied that civics education is already a funded opportunity.

SENATOR MICCICHE interjected that he used civics as an example because many states are now interested in civics and are looking at a national online product with federal deliverability. Some subjects do not need the same face to face interaction as other.

DR. JOHNSON responded that national products are being considered and used. He mentioned the NACTEC truck driving simulator, Career and Technical Education (CTE) platform, interactive reading software and PreK pilot program as examples of opportunities for online delivery. The department is also using assessments to capitalize on broadband. Students will be presented with interactive questions that require manipulation of objects to demonstrate skills. He stated that as a member of the Broadband Taskforce, he considered it essential that DEED partner with industries and equip students to be laborers in the build-out.

[9:28:47 AM](#)

SENATOR MICCICHE commented there should be further discussion on broadband development.

[9:29:42 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH asked for the Department of Education's vision for broadband development now that funding is coming from the federal infrastructure bill. He commented that building broadband throughout the state costs between \$2 - 4 billion.

[9:31:05 AM](#)

DR. JOHNSON replied the department spent \$1 million on Canvas, an online-learning management system. Canvas works with many platforms and can deliver content to any student in Alaska that has broadband access. Lee Butterfield was contracted for the Canvas build-out and knows what content is being added. DEED is working with the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to determine if the infrastructure bill will provide money directly to the department. The department advocates for broadband benefiting students first and is identifying areas that have limited student access. He mentioned the department received permission to hire a director-level coordinator for computer science coding.

[9:35:04 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH requested the Broadband Taskforce meeting times and information on any activities where legislators could become more actively involved.

DR. JOHNSON replied that the taskforce had concluded its work. However, he will provide the meeting schedules of other relevant groups.

[9:36:01 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH suggested that the committee put pressure on the federal Infrastructure Office run by former New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu.

[9:36:24 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGHES stated that the Broadband Taskforce Report recommends a Broadband Office be created to manage the startup process. She opined that broadband should be affordable, accessible and of quality. Society learned from the pandemic that online-learning requires quality instruction. She hopes Alaska's build-out will be a model of excellence for other states.

[9:38:48 AM](#)

DR. JOHNSON responded that quality matters online and in the classroom. The most important in-school factor for a child is the educator, so they must be supported.

The vision for Canvas is that people will create content for the platform. Following review by DEED, content will receive a badge if it meets excellence standards. The review process and funding are still being determined; it is a quality issue. He opined that online learning delivery has difficulties, but none so severe to merit throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

[9:40:21 AM](#)

DR. JOHNSON moved to slide 6 to discuss closing the achievement gap. In July 2021, DEED announced a \$1 million grant to the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) to scope tribal compacting of education in Alaska.

AFN is researching laws, regulations, and policy direction as it engages with Alaska Natives to determine concerns and aspirations for quality education. It designs compacting seminars for educators and administrators that trace the origins of the federal trust relationship and self-determination policy. The project will culminate in pathways for the Alaska Native

community to engage in a positive and meaningful way to further self-determination and compacting in Alaska.

A final scoping document will be presented to DEED and shared with the Board of Education and Early Development, and the Alaska State Legislature. The vision of tribal compacting is ongoing and AFN is doing great work.

[9:42:16 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS mentioned that the AFN compacting bill may need major adjusting so that it succeeds. He opined it may be better to start with a small unit before going statewide. Starting with a small functioning unit may bring in additional federal funds.

DR. JOHNSON stated that AFN President Kitka submitted a white paper at its convention this year that proposed a demonstration project. It is a brilliant idea and shows the wisdom of having AFN bring forward their ideas on education.

[9:44:02 AM](#)

DR. JOHNSON stated Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) has a grant to further Alaska Native involvement in Alaska public education through chartering, STEM programs, computer science, and other educational models. CITC has a history of increasing tribal ownership of education for Alaska Native students. CITC is a great partner for DEED and their work bridges the gap between the status quo and tribal compacting for education.

DR. JOHNSON said DEED continues to close the achievement gap through the Successful School Improvement Processes in conjunction with the Every Student Succeeds Act. It focuses on supporting districts designated as targeted support and comprehensive support. Many revisions are taking place with the program in partnership with associations.

Change is also occurring in World Language Regulation. The request to change foreign language to world language corrects the inaccuracy of calling indigenous languages foreign. The state board created regulations that are open for comment. Part of the change includes having language badges on diplomas.

DR. JOHNSON suggested the committee hear from the Alaska Native Science and Engineering Program (ANSEP). The program is expanding and closing the achievement gap.

[9:47:03 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH asked that the department's partnership with the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) be discussed.

DR. JOHNSON said the achievement gap will also be closed by a new statewide assessment. The new evaluation will parallel what is happening in districts and classrooms while meeting federal and state accountability requirements. The department is working with the Alaska Council of School Administrators (ACSA) and teachers to shape the assessment. As an accountability system its data will be used to determine the progress of the students. The assessment process includes professional development, parental support, and teacher feedback. The purpose of the assessment is to benefit student learning.

9:50:11 AM

DR. JOHNSON advanced to slide 7 and commented that Barbara Adams will continue a three-year contract to strengthen teacher recruitment and retention. Covid money was used to cover the cost because the pathway out of the pandemic includes quality educators. Six areas were identified in the TRR Action Plan to improve recruitment and retention:

- Enhancing recruitment efforts
- Strengthening working conditions
- Restructuring retirement options
- Developing leadership
- Creating paraprofessional pathways
- Streamlining certification

DR. JOHNSON stated that nationally every state is facing recruitment and retention issues. As a result, there are many webinars, seminars, and collaborations in which to participate. Education Commission of the States (ECS) tracks TRR information and will be a useful resource for the department.

9:51:57 AM

SENATOR HUGHES asked for an explanation of the board's proposed change to teacher certification by simplifying qualifications.

DR. JOHNSON responded that the state needs great teachers, not just more teachers. The standard is not being lowered, but new pathways to obtaining great teachers, such as micro-credentialing, should be considered. Any bureaucracies in place that are perfunctory should be changed. Some skilled employees have worked in schools for years. With additional training, they could receive credentials that lead to certification. Tennessee

announced a pilot program where students work and obtain certification through residency. The students are paid while they learn from master teachers. This is an example of an alternative pathway that doesn't lower standards.

9:54:29 AM

SENATOR BEGICH noted that Dr. Johnson has worked with existing partners and expanded partnerships during his tenure. He asked if Dr. Johnson works with his partners in discussing new pathways to build better teachers and streamline education.

DR. JOHNSON replied yes, absolutely.

SENATOR BEGICH commented that it has not always been the department's practice to collaborate with education associations and teachers to vet ideas. He noted that legislative committees have not heard conflicting information during Dr. Johnson's tenure. Teachers, administrators, and the department want quality. He is confident that the innovations they build are for the broad constituency and do not lower quality.

9:56:17 AM

SENATOR STEVENS stated he appreciates that assistant teachers and parent volunteers are being recognized for their abilities. He commented that it is not always possible to leave home to obtain a college degree and he believes alternative pathways can help villages.

SENATOR MICCICHE commented that some of the most amazing students are taught with love at home by a parent who has acquired important skill sets. He is glad that alternative pathways are being considered because districts cannot afford one-on-one education. He opined that home-based specialists might be the key to filling the gap.

9:57:56 AM

DR. JOHNSON stated he agrees with all the comments made. He has concluded that Alaska cannot say it needs to grow its own teachers and then defend the old ways of recruitment and retention. Many people in the state can benefit students if pathways are expanded. The Department of Education and Early Development is fortunate to have dispositive partners with which to work.

9:58:49 AM

DR. JOHNSON moved on to slide 8 and stated that Bree's Law Education curriculum was authored through the Alaska Safe

Children's Act. It is a dating violence and sexual assault prevention program for grades 7-12. It is delivered via DEED's eClassroom at no cost to districts. The second phase of creating new activities and scenarios to keep the content current and engaging has been started.

DEED has begun working with the Mental Health Trust and the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) on mental health support services. In working together, it has been determined that there is a collective need for more information on current school mental and behavioral health activities and services around the state. To assist in the partnership the Mental Health Trust is funding a position at DEED.

In January 2019, DEED began distributing the publication Transforming Schools: A Framework for Trauma Engaged Practice in Alaska. To date, ten thousand copies have been distributed throughout Alaska. A corresponding website with a toolkit of videos and resources is being created. DEED has an eLearning Program with more than 70 trainings and 31,000 school district employees using the platform.

10:02:06 AM

SENATOR HUGHES asked if any federal money is available to implement school safety infrastructure to protect against active shooters. She noted the uptick in the number of high school students experiencing mental health issues due to decreased socialization from Covid. She asked if anyone in the department is assigned to mental health safety.

DR. JOHNSON replied districts received almost \$500 million. Some of the money qualifies for facility upgrades related to safety and wellbeing. Use of the Covid funds is at the discretion of the districts. He stated he has had conversations with the Department of Public Safety and Military and Veterans Affairs regarding school safety issues in Alaska. He is not aware of districts being required to send crisis response plans to DEED.

10:05:18 AM

SENATOR HUGHES asked if any federal funds were available for school infrastructure because of the increase in mental health problems of young people.

DR. JOHNSON replied yes; school districts could use the Covid response money they received.

10:05:41 AM

SENATOR HUGHES asked how much district Covid response money remains.

DR. JOHNSON responded he would find out and provide the amount to the committee.

10:05:51 AM

SENATOR HUGHES added that she would like to know if there is any money in the infrastructure package that could be used to address the general awareness of active shooter concerns due to increased mental health issues in high school students.

10:06:08 AM

DR. JOHNSON stated he would check with partner agencies to see if money would be forthcoming to address school safety concerns due to Covid.

DR. JOHNSON offered that future topics for the committee's consideration include:

- 2021-2022 School Enrollment Counts
- COVID-19 Federal Relief Funding
- System of School Improvement Updates
- State Board of Education March meeting
- Deeper dives into today's topics
- Civics Education*

DR. JOHNSON mentioned that the asterisk next to civics education is there because he would like the committee to consider it. The Fordham Institute, a widely respected foundation that ranks state standards, published a review of all states' civics and history standards. Alaska received an F in both. DEED staff is working to identify funding and processes to tackle the work and hopes the Legislature will partner with them by providing clear, concise, and firm direction. He quoted the following from Educating for American Democracy:

[Original punctuation preserved.]

Students hunger for a deeper understanding of their country's origins, development, triumphs, errors, and travails. In fact, a group of public-school students in Rhode Island recently brought suit against the state, arguing that an adequate civic education is an American citizenship right. In its response, the U.S. district court acknowledged "a cry for help from a generation of young people who are destined to inherit

a country which we—the generation currently in charge—are not stewarding well. ... We would do well to pay attention to their plea."

An informed, authentic, and engaged citizenry would benefit from a better grasp of America's distinctive ideals, how our institutions work, and how We the People strive to perfect our founding ideals and tradition of self-government. All deserve an education that supports "reflective patriotism": appreciation of the ideals of our political order, candid reckoning with the country's failures to live up to those ideals, motivation to take responsibility for self-government, and deliberative skill to debate the challenges that face us in the present and future. History and civics are closely related and intertwining subjects.

DR. JOHNSON concluded by stating that it is appropriate for the Legislature to have high expectations for Alaska's schools through strong legislation.

10:10:28 AM

SENATOR STEVENS stated he appreciates civic education being on the list of future topics for discussion. He recalled a poll of American students that indicated half Socialism over Democracy. He opined that there is work to be done. He mentioned that [SB 72] requires students pass a civics exam to graduate and that it could be taken until passed. He noted the serious decline in college enrollment and asked if there was a known reason.

10:12:13 AM

DR. JOHNSON replied that the reasons students are not attending college are complex. He opined that it starts with strong reading policy. A student who does not read proficiently has difficulty enjoying school and will not look forward to continuing education. Without improved reading outcomes, many students will not graduate high school. Improving reading outcomes in Alaska is not the complete answer but it is the place to start.

The career and technical work Alaska is doing gives students a vision of what they can become and helps motivate some students to pursue secondary education. The Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education Director Sana Efird has been working to assist students in understanding and completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form. As an

indicator of college enrollment, Alaska has the lowest number of completed FAFSA applications in the country. It is important that the K-12 education system and the university system partner to provide opportunities.

[10:14:02 AM](#)

SENATOR HOLLAND thanked Dr. Johnson for the presentation and acknowledged that the Board of Education and Early Development meeting is scheduled for March. He asked for any additional comments.

SENATOR BEGICH acknowledged that this is the last week that Erin Hardin will be working as a Special Assistant for the Department of Education and Early Development.

DR. JOHNSON added that Kollette Schroeder will be replacing Erin Hardin.

[10:16:16 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Holland adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting at 10:16 a.m.